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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges Secretary of State Colin Powell on his July 28-29 visit to Saudi Arabia to call on the government of Saudi Arabia to cease its exportation and support globally for a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hatred and intolerance.

“Numerous reports indicate that funding originating in Saudi Arabia has been used to finance activities that allegedly support religious intolerance, and, in some cases, violence. A growing number of policy makers and experts, including the 9/11 Commission, are calling on the United States to address Saudi support for extremism,” said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal.

In April, several prominent Members of Congress asked the General Accounting Office to undertake a USCIRF-recommended study to examine U.S. government efforts to identify and monitor sources of Saudi funding for institutions that advocate intolerance and violence, and what the U.S. government is doing to counter that influence. In June, an independent task force on terrorist financing at the Council on Foreign Relations endorsed the Commission's recommendation for the study, and called on the U.S. government to publicly acknowledge that serious human rights violations in Saudi Arabia are significant issues in the bilateral relationship. Most recently, the 9/11 Commission's final report notes that Saudi Arabia funded organizations that propagate the Wahhabi doctrine have been exploited by extremists to further their goal of violence. The 9/11 Commission, along with the USCIRF, recommended that these and other problems in the U.S.-Saudi relationship be confronted openly.

The government of Saudi Arabia continues vigorously to enforce its ban on all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and presentation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, often referred to as Wahhabism. This policy violates the rights of the large communities of non-Muslims and other Muslims from a variety of doctrinal schools of

Islam who reside in Saudi Arabia, including Shi'a Muslims, who make up 8-10 percent of the population.

Bansal added, "The Commission also urges Secretary Powell to press for immediate improvements in respect for religious freedom, including: (1) establishing genuine safeguards for the freedom to worship privately, (2) dissolving the mutawaa, (3) permitting non-Wahhabi places of worship in certain areas and letting clergy enter the country, (4) reviewing cases and releasing those who have been detained or imprisoned on account of their religious belief or practices, (5) permitting independent non-governmental organizations, and (6) excluding offensive and discriminatory language from textbooks and the school curriculum."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Preeta D. Bansal
- Felice D. Gaer